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BOOK REVIEW

Pure massacre: Aussie soldiers reflect on the Rwandan genocide

by Kevin O'Halloran

Blue Sky Publishing, Newport, NSW; 2010; 293 pp.; ISBN: 9780980325188; RRP \$34.99 (paperback); Ursula Davidson Library call no. 443 OHAL 2010.



The subject of this book, the 1994 Rwandan Genocide and one of the aftermaths, the Kibeho Displaced Persons' Camp massacre in April 1995, may not at first appeal to the general reader, but the Rwandan genocide cost between 800,000 and 1,000,000 lives, of all ages, in a little over 100 days. This is a rate of 8000 to 10,000 individuals killed each day, every day.

Kevin "Irish" O'Halloran, a platoon sergeant at the time, records his thoughts and reactions during the second half of the 12-month Australian Defence Force (ADF) commitment to the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR). In a foreword to the book, the former Canadian UN Force Commander UNAMIR II, Major General Guy Tousignant, says "what distinguishes Rwanda from other UN peacekeeping missions is the failure of UNAMIR I to protect victims of the genocide, and that ought to be the principal humanitarian failure worth remembering about Rwanda".

O'Halloran provides a well-researched historical background to the UN Security Council Resolution establishing UNAMIR. He skilfully describes the administrative nightmare consequent to the Security Council's refusal to move from a peacekeeping mandate of Chapter VI to the more appropriate for UNAMIR, the peace-enforcement Chapter VII. This perverse UN decision was to put UNAMIR's 'blue-helmeted' troops in even more danger than normal deployments.

He explains the history of the chronic Tutsi-Hutu ethnic divide. He details the 1990 Rwandan Civil War, the signing of the Arusha Accord in 1993, the April 1994 genocide followed by 100 days of slaughter, mainly of Tutsi, but also of the Hutu majority and even the pygmy Twa. He finally deals with the post-genocide chaos of displaced persons (DP). One such DP camp was a non-government organisation-financed sanctuary in south-western Rwanda structured around the Catholic Church at Kibeho.

In a sudden 48-hour frenzy of homicide on the 20 April 1995, the Tutsi-dominated Rwandan army – the Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA) – unleashed the slaughter of a conservatively estimated 4000 Hutus within and around the camp at Kibeho – to become known as the Kibeho Massacre. In this diabolic arena of death facing more than 2000 heavily armed RPA were seven members of a tri-service ADF medical team and a platoon of lightly-armed ADF infantry support. These members of the Australian Medical Support Force and the security support, Australian Services Contingent, were part of the 300-strong ADF contingent to Rwanda, mounted as Operation TAMAR. But the UN mandate determining UNAMIR II prohibited soldiers using their weapons, except in self-defence, nor to assist the natives they were sent to protect. "They were forced to watch as thousands died."

However, under fire, these courageous few did rescue, treat and succour many of the injured Rwandans.

The author devotes several passages at the end of chapters to what he titles "Australian Soldiers Reflect". The soldiers' accounts are moving, compassionate, angry, fearful and horrific. Their emotions may be summed up mainly as a reaction to the perception of the UN as "good men do nothing". He also includes harrowing survivor stories.

The book is well illustrated with sensitively, well-chosen colour-plates and includes a roll of Australian Service Contingents I and II, a resume of the ADF honours and awards for recognised gallant service, a useful glossary of military terms and abbreviations, and a small but handy index. Belatedly and curiously, ADF personnel had to wait some years before UNAMIR II service was recognised as eligibility for the Australian Active Service Medal (AASM).

Could the UN return to Rwanda? Paul Kagame, a major-general with the Tutsi rebel movement, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), crossed over from Uganda in 1990 commencing the Rwandan civil war. Kagame, after serving the last ten years in the top post, was re-elected as the Rwandan president in August 2010. In the same month, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights completed an extensive investigation accusing Rwanda of "wholesale war crimes, including possibly genocide". These followed Rwandan incursions into the neighbouring Democratic Republic of the Congo during the past seven years. If genocide is proven, will the UN next time be seen as "good men properly doing the right thing"?

This book will have special appeal to those with Rwandan service, including their families, but should be read by all ADF personnel, particularly those who are deployable. The interested general reader, military personnel, politicians and genocide historians will find the oral testimonies revealing, persuasive and informative.

Will there be further genocide to add to the litany of the generally recognised 20th century African genocides? They include the Herero and Namas genocides in German South West Africa (1904-08), Hutu-Tutsi genocide in Burundi (1972), the Horn of Africa genocides (Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia and Sudan) in the 1960s to the 1980s and Rwanda (1994). Genocide within Africa, unfortunately, remains very topical. I earnestly recommend Kevin O'Halloran's candid, well-researched and written documentary.

Bruce Short¹

¹This is a shortened version of a review first published in *ADF-Health*, The Journal of the Australian Defence Health Service, October 2010. It is republished by permission.